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Working in Groups

Many students have had little experience working in groups in an academic setting. While there are many excellent books and articles describing group processes, this guide is intended to be short and simply written for students who are working in groups, but who may not be very interested in too much detail. It also provides teachers (and students) with tips on assigning group projects, ways to organize groups, and what to do when the process goes awry.

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Getting Started is an overview that can be used alone (or together material from the *Note to Faculty* below on the reasons and benefits of group work). The remainder of the topics above elaborate different aspects of group processes, and may be distributed separately according to interest.

A Note to Faculty

Some reasons to ask students to work in groups

Asking students to work in small groups allows students to learn interactively. Small groups are good for:

- generating a broad array of possible alternative points of view or solutions to a problem
- giving students a chance to work on a project that is too large or complex for an individual

- allowing students with different backgrounds to bring their special knowledge, experience, or skills to a project, and to explain their orientation to others
- giving students a chance to teach each other
- giving students a structured experience so they can practice skills applicable to professional situations

Some benefits of working in groups (even for short periods of time in class)

- Students who have difficulty talking in class may speak in a small group.
- More students, overall, have a chance to participate in class.
- Talking in groups can help overcome the anonymity and passivity of a large class or a class meeting in a poorly designed room.
- Students who expect to participate actively prepare better for class.
  Caveat: If you ask students to work in groups, be clear about your purpose, and communicate it to them. Students who fear that group work is a potential waste of valuable time may benefit from considering the reasons and benefits above.

Large projects over a period of time

Faculty asking students to work in groups over a long period of time can do a few things to make it easy for the students to work:

- The biggest student complaint about group work is that it takes a lot of time and planning. Let students know about the project at the beginning of the term, so they can plan their time.
- At the outset, provide group guidelines and your expectations.
- Monitor the groups periodically to make sure they are functioning effectively.
- If the project is to be completed outside of class, it can be difficult to find common times to meet and to find a room. Some faculty members provide in-class time for groups to meet. Others help students find rooms to meet in.

Forming the group

- *Forming the group:* Should students form their own groups or should they be assigned? Most people prefer to choose whom they work with. However, many students say they

welcome both kinds of group experiences, appreciating the value of hearing the perspective of another discipline, or another background.

- *Size:* There's nothing hard and fast, but if the group is small and one drops out, can the remaining people do the work? If the group is large, will more time be spent on organizing themselves and trying to malce decisions than on productive work?

- *Resources for students:* Provide a complete class list, with current email addresses. (Students like having this anyway so they can work together even if group projects are not assigned.)
- *Students that don't fit:* You might anticipate your response to the one or two exceptions of a person who really has difficulty in the group. After trying various remedies, is there an out - can this person join another group? work on an independent project?

Organizing the work

Unless part of the goal is to give people experience in the process of goal-setting, assigning tasks, and so forth, the group will be able to work more efficiently if they are provided with some of the following:

- Clear goals: *Why are they working together? What are they expected to accomplish?*

- Ways to break down the task into smaller units

- Ways to allocate responsibility for different aspects of the work

- Ways to allocate organizational responsibility

- A sample time line with suggested check points for stages of work to be completed *Caveat: Setting up effective small group assignments can take a lot of faculty time and organization.*

Getting Started

- Groups work best if people **know each others' names** and a bit of their background and experience, especially those parts that are related to the task at hand. Take time to introduce yourselves.

- Be sure to **include everyone** when considering ideas about how to proceed as a group. Some may never have participated in a small group in an academic setting. Others may have ideas about what works well. Allow time for people to express their inexperience and hesitations as well as their experience with group projects.

- Most groups **select a leader** early on, especially if the work is a long-term project. Other options for leadership in long-term projects include taking turns for different works or different phases of the work.

- Everyone needs to **discuss and clarify the goals** of the group's work. Go around the group and hear everyone's ideas (before discussing them) or encourage divergent thinking by brainstorming. If you miss this step, trouble may develop part way through the project. Even though time is scarce and you may have a big project ahead of you, groups may take some time to settle in to work. If you anticipate this, you may not be too impatient with the time it takes to get started.

Organizing the Work

- Break up big jobs into smaller pieces. **Allocate responsibility** for different parts of the group project to different individuals or teams. Do not forget to account for assembling pieces into final form.

- **Develop a time-line,** including who will do what, in what format, by when. Include time at the end for assembling pieces into final form. (This may take longer than you anticipate.) At the end of each meeting, individuals should review what work they expect to complete by the following session.

Understanding and Managing Group Processes

- Groups work best if everyone has a chance to make strong contributions to the discussion at meetings and to the work of the group project.

- At the beginning of each meeting, decide what you expect to have accomplished by the end of the meeting.

- Someone (probably not the leader) should write all ideas, as they are suggested, on the board or on large sheets of paper. Designate a recorder of the group's decisions. Allocate responsibility for group process (especially if you do not have a fixed leader) such as a time manager for meetings and someone who periodically says that it is time to see how things are going (see below).

- Save some time toward the end of the first meeting (and periodically as the group continues) to check in with each other on how the process is working:
  - What leadership structure does the group want - one designated leader? rotating leaders? separately assigned roles?
  - Are any more ground rules needed, such as starting meetings on time, kinds of interruptions allowed, and so forth?

- Is everyone contributing to discussions? Can discussions be managed differently so all can participate? Are people listening to each other and allowing for different kinds of contributions?
- Are all members accomplishing the work expected of them? Is there anything group members can do to help those experiencing difficulty?
- Are there disagreements or difficulties within the group that need to be addressed? (Is someone dominating? Is someone left out?)
- Is outside help needed to solve any problems?
- Is everyone enjoying the work?

Including Everyone and Their Ideas

Groups work best if everyone is included and everyone has a chance to contribute ideas. The group's task may seem overwhelming to some people, and they may have no idea how to go about accomplishing it. To others, the direction the project should take may seem obvious. **The job of the group is to break down the work into chunks, and to allow everyone to contribute.** The direction that seems obvious to some may turn out not to be so obvious after all. In any event, it will surely be improved as a result of some creative modification.

Encouraging Ideas

The goal is to produce as many ideas as possible in a short time without evaluating them. All ideas are carefully listened to but not commented on and are usually written on the board or large sheets of paper so everyone can see them, and so they don't get forgotten or lost. **Take turns by going around the group** - hear from everyone, one by one.

One specific method is to **generate ideas through brainstorming.** People mention ideas in any order (without others' commenting, disagreeing or asking too many questions). The advantage of brainstorming is that ideas do not become closely associated with the individuals who suggested them. This process encourages creative thinking, if it is not rushed and if all ideas are written down (and therefore, for the time-being, accepted). A disadvantage: when ideas are suggested quickly, it is more difficult for shy participants or for those who are not speaking their native language. One approach is to begin by brainstorming and then go around the group in a more structured way asking each person to add to the list.
Examples of what to say:

- *Why don't we take a minute or two for each of us to present our views?*

- *Let's get all our ideas out before evaluating them. We'll clarify them before we organize or evaluate them.*
- *We'll discuss all these ideas after we hear what everyone thinks.*
- *You don't have to agree with her, but let her finish.*
- *Let's spend a few more minutes to see if there are any possibilities we haven't thought of, no matter how unlikely they seem.*

Group Leadership

- The leader is responsible for seeing that the **work is organized** so that it will get done. The leader is also responsible for understanding and managing group interactions so that the atmosphere is positive.
- The leader must **encourage everyone's contributions** with an eye to accomplishing the work. To do this, the leader must observe how the group's process is working. (Is the group moving too quickly, leaving some people behind? Is it time to shift the focus to another aspect of the task?)
- The leader must encourage group interactions and **maintain a positive atmosphere.** To do this the leader must observe the way people are participating as well as be aware of feelings communicated non-verbally. (Are individuals' contributions listened to and appreciated by others? Are people arguing with other people, rather than disagreeing with their ideas? Are some people withdrawn or annoyed?)
- The leader must **anticipate** what information, materials or other resources the group needs as it works.
- The leader is responsible for **beginning and ending on time.** The leader must also organize practical support, such as the room, chalk, markers, food, breaks.
  (Note: In addition to all this, the leader must take part in thc discussion and participate otherwise as a group member. At these times, the leader must be careful to step aside from the role of leader and signal participation as an equal, not a dominant voice.)

Concerns of Individuals That May Affect Their Participation

- How do I fit in? Will others listen to me? Am I the only one who doesn't know everyone else? How can I work with people with such different backgrounds and expericnce?
- Who will make the decisions? How much influence can I have?

- What do I have to offer to the group? Does everyone know more than I do? Does anyone know anything, or will I have to do most of the work myself?

Characteristics of a Group that is Performing Effectively

- All members have a chance to express themselves and to influence the group's decisions. All contributions are listened to carefully, and strong points acknowledged. Everyone realizes that the job could not be done without the cooperation and contribution of everyone else.
- Differences are dealt with directly with the person or people involved. The group identifies all disagreements, hears everyone's views and tries to come to an agreement that makes sense to everyone. Even when a group decision is not liked by someone, that person will follow through on it with the group.
- The group encourages everyone to take responsibility, and hard work is recognized. When things are not going well, everyone makes an effort to help each other. There is a shared sense of pride and accomplishment.

Focusing on a Direction

After a large number of ideas have been generated and listed (e.g. on the board), the group can categorize and examine them. Then the group should agree on a process for choosing from among the ideas. Advantages and disadvantages of different plans can be listed and then voted on. Some possibilities can be eliminated through a straw vote (each group member could have 2 or 3 votes). Or all group members could vote for their first, second, and third choices. Alternatively, criteria for a successful plan can be listed, and different alternatives can be voted on based on the criteria, one by one.

Categorizing and evaluating ideas

Examples of what to say:

- *We have about 20 ideas here. Can we sort them into a few general categories?*
- *When we evaluate each others' ideas, can we mention some positive aspects before expressing concerns?*
- *Could you give us an example of what you mean?*
- *Who has dealt with this kind of problem before?*
- *What are the pluses of that approach? The minuses?*

- *We have two basic choices. Let's brainstorm. First let's look at the advantages of the first choice, then the disadvantages.*
- *Let's try ranking these ideas in priority order. The group should try to come to an agreement that makes sense to everyone.*

Making a decision

After everyone's views are heard and all points of agreement and disagreement are identified, the group should try to arrive at an agreement that makes sense to everyone. Examples of what to say:

- *There seems to be some agreement here. Is there anyone who couldn't live with solution #2?*
- *Are there any objections to going that way?*
- *You still seem to have worries about this solution. Is there anything that could be added or taken away to make it more acceptable? We're doing fine. We've agreed on a great deal. Let's stay with this and see if we can work this last issue through.*
- *It looks as if there are still some major points of disagreement. Can we go back and define what those issues are and work on them rather than forcing a decision now.*

How People Function in Groups

If a group is functioning well, work is getting done and constructive group processes are creating a positive atmosphere. In good groups the individuals may contribute differently at different times. They cooperate and human relationships are respected. This may happen automatically or individuals, at different times, can make it their job to maintain the atmospbere and human aspects of the group.

Roles That Contribute to the Work

Initiating - taking the initiative, at any time; for example, convening the group, suggesting procedures, changing direction, providing new energy and ideas. *(How about if we.... What would happen if... ?)*

Seeking information or opinions - requesting facts, preferences, suggestions and ideas. *(Could you say a little more about...Would you say this is a more workable idea than that?)*

Giving information or opinions - providing facts, data, information from research or experience. *(In my experience I have seen...May I tell you what I found out about...?)*

Questioning - stepping back from what is happening and challenging the group or asking other specific questions about the task. *(Are we assuming that... ? Would the consequence of this be... ?)*

Clarifying - interpreting ideas or suggestions, clearing up confusions, defining terms or asking others to clarify. This role can relate different contributions from different people, and link up ideas that seem unconnected. *(It seems that you are saying...Doesn't this relate to what [name] was saying earlier?)*

Summarizing - putting contributions into a pattern, while adding no new information. This role is important if a group gets stuck. Some groups officially appoint a summarizer for this potentially powerful and influential role. *(If we take all these pieces and put them together...Here's what I think we have agreed upon so far... Here are our areas of disagreement...)*

Roles That Contribute to the Atmosphere

Supporting - remembering others' remarks, being encouraging and responsive to others. Creating a warm, encouraging atmosphere, and making people feel they belong helps the group handle stresses and strains. People can gesture, smile, and make eye-contact without saying a word. Some silence can be supportive for people who are not native speakers of English by allowing them a chance to get into discussion. *(I understand what you are getting at...As [name] was just saying...)*

Observing - noticing the dynamics of the group and commenting. Asking if others agree or if they see things differently can be an effective way to identify problems as they arise. *(We seem to be stuck...Maybe we are done for now, we are all worn out...As I see it, what happened just a minute ago..Do you agree?)*

Mediating - recognizing disagreements and figuring out what is behind the differences. When people focus on real differences, that may lead to striking a balance or devising ways to accommodate different values, views, and approaches. *(I think the two of you are coming at this from completely different points of view...Wait a minute. This is how [name/ sees the problem. Can you see why she may see it differently?)*

Reconciling - reconciling disagreements. Emphasizing shared views among members can reduce tension. *(The goal of these two strategies is the same, only the means are different… Is there anything that these positions have in common?)*

Compromising - yielding a position or modifying opinions. This can help move the group forward. *(Everyone else seems to agree on this, so I'll go along with... I think if I give in on this, we could reach a decision.)*

Making a personal comment - occasional personal comments, especially as they relate to the work. Statements about one's life are often discouraged in professional settings; this may be a mistake since personal comments can strengthen a group by making people feel human with a lot in common.

Humor - funny remarks or good-natured comments. Humor, if it is genuinely good-natured and not cutting, can be very effective in relieving tension or dealing with participants who dominate or put down others. Humor can be used constructively to make the work more acceptable by providing a welcome break from concentration. It may also bring people closer together, and make the work more fun.
All the positive roles turn the group into an energetic, productive enterprise. People who have not reflected on these roles may misunderstand the motives and actions of people working in a group. If someone other than the leader initiates ideas, some may view it as an attempt to take power from the leader. Asking questions may similarly be seen as defying authority or slowing down the work of the group. Personal anecdotes may be thought of as trivializing the discussion. Leaders who understand the importance of these many roles can allow and encourage them as positive contributions to group dynamics. Roles that contribute to the work give the group a sense of direction and achievement. Roles contributing to the human atmosphere give the group a sense of cooperation and goodwill.

Some Common Problems (and Some Solutions)

Floundering - While people are still figuring out the work and their role in the group, the group may experience false starts and circular discussions, and decisions may be postponed.

Examples of what to say:

- *Here's my understanding of what we are trying to accomplish... Do we all agree?*
- *What would help us move forward: data? resources?*
- *Let's take a few minutes to hear everyone's suggestions about how this process might work better and what we should do next.*

Dominating or reluctant participants - Some people might take more than their share of the discussion by talking too often, asserting superiority, telling lengthy stories, or not letting others finish. Sometimes humor can be used to discourage people from dominating. Others may rarely speak because they have difficulty getting in the conversation. Sometimes looking at people who don't speak can be a non-verbal way to include them. Asking quiet participants for their thoughts outside the group may lead to their participation within the group.
Examples of what to say:

- *How would we state the general problem? Could we leave out the details for a moment? Could we structure this part of the discussion by taking turns and hearing what everyone has to say?*

- *Let's check in with each other about how the process is working: Is everyone contributing to discussions? Can discussions be managed differently so we can all participate? Are we all listening to each other?*

Digressions and tangents - Too many interesting side stories can be obstacles to group progress. It may be time to take another look at the agenda and assign time estimates to items. Try to summarize where the discussion was before the digression. Or, consider whether there is something making the topic easy to avoid.
Examples of what to say:

- *Can we go back to where we were a few minutes ago and see what we were trying to do ?*

- *Is there something about the topic itself that makes it difficult to stick to?*

Getting Stuck - Too little progress can get a group down. It may be time for a short break or a change in focus. However, occasionally when a group feels that it is not making progress, a solution emerges if people simply stay with the issue.
Examples of what to say:

- *What are the things that are helping us solve this problem? What's preventing us from solving this problem?*

- *Let's take a few minutes to hear everyone's suggestions about how this process might work better and what we should do next.*

- *I understand that some of you doubt whether anything new will happen if we work on this problem. Are we willing to give it a try for the next fifteen minutes?*

Rush to work - Usually one person in the group is less patient and more action-oriented than the others. This person may reach a decision more quickly than the others and then pressure the group to move on before others are ready.
Examples of what to say:

- *Are we all ready-to make a decision on this?*

- *What needs to be done before we can move ahead?*

- *Let's go around and see where everyone stands on this.*

Feuds - Occasionally a conflict (having nothing to do with the subject of the group) carries over into the group and impedes its work. It may be that feuding parties will not be able

to focus until the viewpoint of each is heard. Then they must be encouraged to lay the issue aside.
Examples of what to say:

- *So, what you are saying is... And what you are saying is... How is that related to the work here?*
- *If we continue too long on this, we won't be able to get our work done. Can we agree on a time limit and then go on?*

References

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See also: Tip Sheets, Collaborative Learning